

Catholic Common Ground Lecture
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I am delighted to be here this evening, for at least three reasons. First, I am profoundly honored, and a bit overwhelmed, to be included in the series of Catholic luminaries who have delivered this prestigious lecture. I am quite conscious that I am not their equal, either in terms of service to the Church or theological profundity. I hope I can compensate with sincerity, as well as the relative uniqueness of my perspective as a journalist who lives in Rome and covers the Holy See on a daily basis. Second, I am honored that Professor Mary Ann Glendon has agreed to respond to this address. Her contributions to the intellectual life of the Church are well known, and without realizing it, she has often helped me think through complicated issues. I am grateful to Professor Glendon, and I look forward to her comments tonight.

Finally, I am pleased to be among you because I am convinced of the importance of the Common Ground Project, which aims to bring Catholics of differing outlooks and experiences into conversation. I know something of the riches of this enterprise. The greatest blessing of my job, in fact, is that it gives me occasion to talk to Catholics of all shapes and sizes. In Rome, I move in and out of the Holy See, the pontifical universities, religious communities, the diplomatic world, non-governmental organizations and the Italian ecclesiastical scene. I spend time with progressive social justice groups, traditionalist liturgical movements, neo-conservative political circles, and dynamic charismatic movements, not to mention Catholics from widely differing cultures and linguistic groups, and I never feel that I have to choose among them. Quite the contrary, my instinct tells me they are all valuable parts of the *koinonia*, perhaps none holding the final answer to the problems facing the Church. The acrimony I sometimes find as I cross these lines pains me. I worry that the "spirituality of communion" to which the Holy Father calls us is honored more in the breach than the observance.

These perceptions have been strengthened by my experience of lecturing fairly widely across the United States in the last three years. The subject of the Vatican and the papacy is of broad appeal, and hence I draw fairly mixed audiences, with Catholics from all points of view. When it comes time for discussion, I am often startled at how quickly things degenerate into disputation. The alarming phenomenon is not merely that Catholics seem angry with one another, but that they increasingly seem to be speaking separate languages. Self-identified 'progressive' Catholics read their own publications, listen to their own speakers, attend their own conferences, and think their own thoughts. Self-identified 'conservatives' do the same thing. Hence when you bring people from these two camps into the same room, they have moved so far down separate paths that even if there is good will for a conversation, quite often a shared intellectual and cultural framework is missing.

In all this, the discussion in the Church reflects the increasingly arid discourse in the broader culture. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has described the phenomenon well:

"The self-assertive shrillness of protest arises because . . . protestors can never win an argument: the indignant self-righteousness of protest arises because . . . the protestors can never lose an argument either. Hence the utterance of protest is characteristically addressed to those who already share the protestors' premises. . . . Protestors rarely have anyone else to talk to but themselves."

As a journalist, I confess that my industry bears some responsibility here. Good journalism's mission is to test everyone's biases against the facts. By its very nature, journalism should be an aide to dialogue. Yet this is increasingly not what we see. If one of the unwritten laws of my profession is "sex sells," a new one might be formulated as "spin wins." In a crowded market, those media outlets with a clear ideological profile seem to have the best chance of standing out. In the TV world, the success of Fox News makes this point, as does the growth of left-leaning alternative weeklies in the newspaper business. The old wall between news and editorials has become a porous membrane, and the search for zingers has supplanted sober exploration of issues. The conversation within the Church cannot help but be corroded by all of this. The clear ideological stratification of Catholic media in the United States is but one unfortunate example.

For all these reasons, I find myself reflecting much these days about the need for shared spaces of information and conversation, and all the more convinced that Common Ground is important.

I am what the Italians call a Vaticanista, meaning that it is my full-time work to track the vicissitudes in this 108-acre island of ecclesiastical life in the heart of modern urban Rome called "the Vatican." Concretely, this means that several times a year I go to the Apostolic Palace, into the papal apartments, to watch the Holy Father receive some dignitary, usually a head

of state. Most recently I was there for the June 4 visit of President Bush. Almost every day I'm in Rome takes me in and out of some office of the Roman Curia. I'm in constant phone and e-mail contact with officials of the Curia, trying to keep my finger on the pulse of what's going on. My life is composed of a seemingly infinite series of congresses, symposia, plenary assemblies, book presentations, press conferences, lunches and dinners and embassy parties. Finally, I move when the pope moves. In the last four years, I've been with the Holy Father to Greece, Syria, Ukraine, Canada, Guatemala, Mexico, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Spain, Croatia, Slovakia, Bosnia and Switzerland. All this gives me an up-close-and-personal perspective on the Vatican, and some appreciation of the complexity of the universal Church.

I have been asked to apply this international perspective tonight to the issue of dialogue within the Church. Actually, my very first overseas assignment was to cover one of the more unique attempts at fostering dialogue within a divided Catholic community in recent years, the "Dialogue for Austria" in 1998. I want to briefly tell you the story, because I think it offers a couple of object lessons for our discussion.

In 1985, the widely beloved Cardinal Franz König, who recently died at 98, stepped down as the archbishop of Vienna. His successor, a conservative Benedictine abbot named Hans Hermann Gröer, was named without consultation with König. The result was a new degree of polarization in what had been a fairly compact Austrian Catholicism. Then in 1995, a firestorm was unleashed when several men came forward to allege that Gröer had sexually abused them when they were novice monks. Gröer initially denied the charges and then became silent. He eventually resigned and was replaced by the Dominican theologian Cristoph Schönborn, now himself a cardinal. Not satisfied with Gröer's retreat, many Austrians suspected a cover-up. Finally four Austrian bishops, including Schönborn, announced that they were "morally certain" of Gröer's guilt.

The crisis generated a reform movement. On Good Friday in 1995, two Austrian laity, Tomas Plankensteiner and Ingrid Thurner, went on television in Innsbruck to announce the formation of a KirchenVolksBewegung -- a "People's Movement of the Church." Within a matter of weeks they had gathered three-quarters of a million signatures on a petition demanding five specific reforms. Over the next three years, they skillfully built their movement into a potent force in Austrian society, and finally the bishops felt obliged to call a unique national "parliament" of Austrian Catholics to allow their issues to be debated. The bishops pledged to carry whatever recommendations came out of that session to Rome.

Sensing a good story, I persuaded my editors at the National Catholic Reporter, who have been endlessly supportive of my interests, to fly me to Salzburg to cover the event. It was three days of high drama, with intense floor debates among abbots and pastors, lay theologians and bishops, social justice activists and Catholic politicians. When the time came to vote, it was a resounding win for the reform forces: delegates endorsed optional celibacy, greater flexibility for inter-communion, local election of bishops, and a host of other measures. Many Austrians left the dialogue feeling their problems had been solved.

The epilogue was rather more prosaic. The Austrian bishops carried these recommendations to Rome, where they went nowhere, as was entirely predictable. Within Austria a cycle of frustration and recrimination set in, with many Catholics concluding the dialogue had been a charade, while some bishops blamed others for permitting it in the first place. Why raise expectations of changes that will never happen, these bishops asked. Meanwhile, diocese by diocese, the process of dialogue was quietly dismantled. Today, Austrians tell me that whatever optimism was generated by Salzburg has been replaced by resignation.

The experience taught me two lessons. First, it is difficult to assess the long-term significance of a crisis at its peak. In 1995, at the height of the Gröer affair, it seemed unthinkable that Austrian Catholicism would revert to "business as usual," but most observers would agree this is what has happened. It is a point with obvious implications for analysis of the recent American crisis. Second, I learned that zero-sum strategies for managing differences in the Church borrowed from secular politics, where one side wins and the other loses, are a dead end. While the results might bring catharsis for the victors, they also produce resentment among the losers and hence deepen, rather than heal, divisions. Austria's secular press showered Salzburg with praise -- largely because its conclusions on women, sexuality and authority coincided with the biases of most journalists -- but conservative Austrian Catholics felt betrayed. In the end, Salzburg was good theatre but bad koinonia. (This, by the way, is the positive sense of what it means for the Church not to be a democracy).

To see what other lessons might be learned from local churches around the world, I prepared a questionnaire and sent it to Catholic observers in various countries. I asked whether polarization was a problem; whether there's a tendency for disagreements to become more acrimonious; and where the public spaces are for dialogue.

Let me share some reactions.

Poland: It is unquestionable we have not one but several Churches. Polarization occurs not only between "liberal" and "conservatives," but also between "rich" and "poor" and optimists and pessimists. There is an unbelievable lack of dialog space. The secular press talks about the Church mainly in terms of scandalous affairs and internal conflicts. The Catholic press, with some exceptions, is obsequious toward the hierarchy, hiding conflict.

Germany: There is a similar polarization, mainly among the postconciliar generation. Young people either are no more interested in the church or are more conservative. There is no real platform of dialogue as far as I can see. The secular media are far from the Catholic Church, which seems to them an oppressive institution.

Japan: The Catholic community is small, and intellectuals are not taken by theoretical issues. It is rare to have any public disagreement, although recently a group of Catholics sued a bishop who used money of the diocese to support a seminary of the Neocatechumenate. The Japanese feel it is a lack of respect to show a different opinion.

Australia: We certainly have polarization. There is virtually no space for dialogue of consequence. The bishops' national conference is closed, even to the media. The Catholic press with few exceptions is highly censored. The universities are largely disconnected from debates in the Catholic community.

England: The Church in England is much less polarized than in the USA. The bishops tend to be open-minded and pragmatic, if rather timid, people, who actively promote dialogue. There are several reasons why this is so:

We are a small Church, and so it is easier for the bishops to know each other well and understand each other. We have had (and have) excellent nuncios who have tried to appoint people who would be welcomed by the clergy and people. The English tend to distrust ideological extremes of the left or the right.

Philippines: In the Philippines the split is not so much between liberals and conservatives in theology as in social involvement. The rights of squatters, land reform, equal rights for women are where the split is found along class lines, with theological liberals and conservatives found on both sides. There is no real public space for dialogue about these questions.

From this decidedly unscientific sample, I extract three observations:

Most Catholic communities around the world suffer some degree of polarization, though often it is perceived as less extreme than in the United States. The issues around which polarization occurs differ with the local situation;

Smallness of size and scale, and the capacity to form personal relationships, seems to affect how polarized divisions become.

There seems near-universal despair about the absence of public spaces for conversation among Catholics of different opinions, outlooks and temperaments.

As a journalist, it's my job to ask difficult questions, so let me now ask one aloud, prompted by this last point about the absence of spaces for dialogue: 'Why didn't Common Ground work?' Please don't misunderstand; I know the Common Ground initiative does very important things. Gathering us here this evening is a splendid case in point. At the same time, however, most observers would probably agree that measured against the aspirations of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, which were to transform the public conversation in the American Church, the Common Ground initiative has not had the desired impact. If anything, we are more polarized, more strangers to one another, today than when the project began. So, the tough question: Why?

I have a hunch. I think the proper analogy may be to substance abuse - people can't be helped if they don't want help. Similarly, a dialogue program is of no use to people convinced they have nothing to learn from one another. Perhaps, therefore, American Catholics haven't yet "bottomed out." They have not had the kind of illumination, the "ah-hah" moment, in which they grasped the sterility of ideological warfare.

I wish I had a formula for manufacturing such illumination on a mass scale. Instead, all I can offer is my personal story, in the hope that it might be indicative of something. My "conversion" to dialogue originated in a sort of "bottoming out." It came with the publication of my biography of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issued by Continuum in 2000 and titled *The Vatican's Enforcer of the Faith*. The first major review appeared in *Commonweal*, authored by another of my distinguished predecessors in this lecture series, Fr. Joseph Komonchak. It was not, let me be candid, a positive review. Fr. Komonchak

pointed out a number of shortcomings and a few errors, but the line that truly stung came when he accused me of "Manichean journalism." He meant that I was locked in a dualistic mentality in which Ratzinger was consistently wrong and his critics consistently right. I was initially crushed, then furious. I re-read the book with Fr. Komonchak's criticism in mind, however, and reached the sobering conclusion that he was correct. The book, which I modestly believe is not without its merits, is nevertheless too often written in a "good guys and bad guys" style that vilifies the cardinal. It took Fr. Komonchak pointing this out, publicly and bluntly, for me to ask myself, "Is this the kind of journalist I want to be?" My answer was no, and I hope that in the years since I have come to appreciate more of those shades of gray that Fr. Komonchak rightly insists are always part of the story. (I will not embarrass Fr. Komonchak by asking for his evaluation of my performance!)

My point is that it is unpredictable what will produce change in the human heart. I would tongue-in-cheek suggest that perhaps the editors of *Commonweal* could arrange for more negative reviews of books by Catholic authors, but I actually doubt that's the solution. In some fashion, however, Catholics need to be brought to see how their blinders and prejudices, far from safeguarding the faith, actually impede full Catholicity. Again, I say: I do not know how to engineer this, but if I were a pastor or spiritual director or bishop these days, I would be spending a great deal of time pondering the outlines of a "spirituality of dialogue." We must have a spirituality before a program for dialogue can realize its potential.

Let me suggest five elements that seem to be at the core of such a spirituality.

The first is a dose of epistemological humility. We live in an era of instant opinion, where everyone is expected to have to an opinion on every topic under the sun. The raw truth, however, is that we don't know everything. We have to re-learn the discipline of withholding final judgment, realizing that we may not always have the requisite data or reflection to draw definitive conclusions. This is not a plea for relativism; where reason shows something to be true, or scripture and tradition posit something as definitive, the mind should not hold back assent. But even in those cases, there may be implications or dimensions we have missed, and dialogue can reveal them to us. Dialogue is, in other words, an essential element of the search for truth, but only if we are open to being shaped by the experience.

Second is a solid formation in Catholic tradition, as a means of creating a common language. Allow me to quote Franciscan Fr. David Jaeger, the chief negotiator for the Holy See in its relations with the Israeli government and a noted canonist. Jaeger writes:

The essential condition is learning in Scripture and Tradition, the Fathers and the Doctors. There were theological disputations in the past, but the disputants had precisely this, common ground, their common learning. Nowadays I observe that all too often the shouting match is between "gut" conservatives and "gut" liberals, whose common ground is their shared ignorance. I myself am very conservative doctrinally, yet, as a seminary professor in the late eighties and nineties, I was surprised to see that my would-be "conservative" students invariably assumed that the most extreme position on everything was always the most Catholic, without any understanding of the Tradition. The solution is a renewed emphasis on the common ground of humanistic and Christian learning, so that we do not engage in "political" negotiation, but in a responsible "searching of the Scriptures."

I don't have Jaeger's erudition, but I can only echo his conclusion. This, by the way, is one of the eternal problems in trying to explain Vatican documents to the American media market. The documents assume a classic Aristotelian/Thomistic cultural formation, while typical American responses to them, at least at the popular level, come out of a liberal, democratic worldview. The result is often misunderstanding.

Third, a proper spirituality of dialogue also requires patience. On this point, former Dominican Master General Fr. Timothy Radcliffe writes:

There can only be dialogue if we take time. It took 400 years for the Christology of Chalcedon to emerge. If we disagree with someone then one cannot make progress if one has put down a 20 minute meeting in the diary. The crucial issue is this: to what do we give that most precious gift which is time? God only gives us a little of it: 27,000 days on average. How shall we use them? If the unity of the Church is important, then we need to give time to those with whom we tussle, time to understand and to be challenged. A culture of activism means not just that we are all too busy, but that we are busy doing what is not perhaps so important.

Fourth, a spirituality of dialogue requires perspective, meaning the capacity to see issues through the eyes of others. This is a critical quality in a global Church with 1.1 billion members, a point brought home during the peak of the American sexual abuse crisis in Spring 2002. As you will recall, there was a drumbeat of criticism in the American press and in activist

Catholic circles because the Vatican was not directly engaged. Officials of the Holy See, including the Holy Father himself, were sometimes assumed to be apathetic, out of touch, or even complicit in the cover-up. I was in Rome during that period, however, and seen from there, the most important religion story of Spring 2002 was not the American situation, but the 39-day standoff between Israelis and Palestinians at Bethlehem's Basilica of the Nativity. This was the drama on the front pages of newspapers, and the lead item on the evening news. While Americans were frustrated that the Holy See did not have a laser-beam focus on their crisis, some in the Vatican were equally shocked that the fate of the holy sites did not seem important to the American Catholic community. After all, America has enormous influence in the region, and the fate of their coreligionists in the Holy Land should have been of concern to American Catholics, yet few spoke out. In the end, a bloody denouement was narrowly avoided. One may argue that the Vatican's priorities should have been elsewhere, but no intelligent debate is possible until the perspective of the other party is properly understood.

Fifth and finally, we must foster a spirituality of dialogue that does not come at the expense of a full-bodied expression of Catholic identity. There is no future for dialogue if convinced Catholics sense the price of admission is setting aside their convictions. If dialogue means we have to go fuzzy on abortion, to take one obvious example, it is dead. To return to our earlier question, why didn't Common Ground work? It's not because it failed to respond to a real need. In fact, I sense a deeply felt desire among Catholics to overcome our internal bickering and divisions. That desire, however, is not the only, and probably not the strongest, trend coursing through Christianity. Today, I would assert that the strongest single impulse in the Christian community pivots on identity - the desire for a robust assertion of what it means to be a Christian. You can't explain the phenomenal success of "The Passion of the Christ" without understanding this impulse. It is perhaps most strongly felt by younger generations whose members did not acquire a strong sense of identity either in the home or in school, even Catholic schools. Hence the spirituality of dialogue needed is one that combines a vigorous assertion of identity, opening up our distinctive language and rituals and worldview to those who hunger for them, without ending up in a "Taliban Catholicism" that knows only how to excoriate and condemn.

I know this audience hardly requires a closing fervorino, but let me end with a final reflection. Normal American ambivalence about Roman authority was given a turbo charge by the sex abuse crisis. A May 2003 poll in The Boston Globe found that 39 percent of Catholics in the Boston area would support the creation of an American Catholic Church independent of the Vatican. The news is actually worse, because among Catholics aged 18-39, the proposal for cutting ties with Rome rises to 50.9 percent. Granted that attitudes in Boston are sharper than elsewhere, this finding should be alarming for anyone concerned with *communio* between the universal and the local Church. Certainly, a formal schism is improbable. But if present antagonisms fester, a cycle of recrimination and suspicion could result, producing an undeclared rupture such as the Catholic world has already seen in places such as Holland, Germany and Austria. Given that the United States is the leading political and commercial power in the world, and the Holy See the leading voice of conscience, then American Catholics and the Vatican should be collaborating on a Catholic perspective on global concerns. Disagreements and tensions will always be with us, and can be healthy. The cause of human dignity, however, is not served by a breach between Rome and the American Catholic "street," or within the American Catholic community between pro- and anti-Roman voices.

Hence there is no more urgent task than putting the Church in dialogue with itself, at all levels and across all divisions. My hope is fired by gatherings such as this one, in which good will and devotion to the *koinonia* is so clear. For all of our faults, American Catholicism remains resilient and resourceful. We face a wounded civic culture in need of the contributions that a unified Catholic voice can bring. May the quest for a spirituality of dialogue lead us into that long-awaited "Catholic moment."

Thank you very much.

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